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Hypermedia and Governance in Saudi Arabia

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Keywords
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Contents

The impact of cyberspace on governance occurs within an environment where cyber-communication processes interact with communication processes using other media. Those interactions among different communication processes experience shifts when new media enter the environment. "Small" media, such as mobile telephones, have had such an effect, lighting up what I call hypermedia chains that modify the effect of Internet-based communication. Saudi Arabian society provides a useful example of an environment in which fundamental aspects of the nature of governance have been affected by recent developments in hypermedia processes that heavily, but not exclusively, include the Internet and mobile communications. Responses in Saudi Arabia to a reality television program provide a unique opportunity to explore how the contemporary hypermedia environment has affected the nature of governance in that society.

For the purposes of this chapter, *hypermedia space* is a broadly defined symbolic field created by hypermedia chains. The Canadian international relations scholar Ronald Deibert advocates the term "hypermedia" because it:

> "... not only captures the convergence of discrete technologies, it also suggests the massive penetration and ubiquity of electronic media characteristic of the new communications environment ... the prefix 'hyper' (meaning 'over' or 'above') emphasizes two central characteristics of that environment: the speed by which communications currently take place, and the intertextuality or interoperatibility of once-discrete media ... linked *together* into a single seamless web of digital–electronic–telecommunications." [1]

Inspired by this definition, I consider *hypermedia chains* to consist of communication processes using e–mail, Web sites, cellular telephony, text messaging, digital cameras, electronic newspapers, and satellite television [2]. These processes can be defined as *remediations* since each medium in the hypermedia chain refers to, and borrows elements of symbolic communication from other media, hence *re*–mediating previous communication. This study explores a crucial moment in the history of Saudi governance as a case study of how changes in the hypermedia environment impact governance. The advent of satellite television in the early 1990s and the Internet in 1999 initiated a slow but irreversible transfer of social relations from the intensely policed Saudi social space to hypermedia space, a less controllable and therefore potentially subversive space created by various interacting media and information technologies. Most elements of this hypermedia space have existed for years, but I will argue that the introduction of Arabic–language reality television programs activated this hypermedia space and brought it into public discourse.

Countries in the throes of social, political and economic changes, or whose internal equilibrium is unstable, are forced to continuously adapt their governance systems. As one of those countries, Saudi Arabia is a complex polity whose fragile stability requires a mode of governance responsive to the country's numerous constituencies [3]. That the Saudi combination of religious conservatism, oligarchic capitalism, oil wealth, and deep geographical differences has not exploded is largely due to the compromises that the royal family concluded with religious activists, liberal reformers, business interests, and the House of Saud's protector, the United States. Historically, debates around the introduction of media and information technologies into the country occurred in the context of changing parameters of governance, usually within the broad framework of Western influences on a society that prides itself to be the cradle of Islam. The Saudi paradox between a capitalistic economy dependent on trade with foreigners and a conservative society with influential elements who are hostile to foreign influences, explains the various political and religious maneuvers that surround the initial introduction of and subsequent debate about new information and media technologies. The case study discussed in this paper will illustrate how inter–media dynamics triggered by reality television become an arena of struggle between religious, political and business groups attempting to shape future modalities of governance to be compatible with their interests.

Indeed, Saudi history is punctuated with events triggered by collisions between emergent technology–enabled forms of governance on the one hand, and established forms of political and social organization on the other hand. Radio in the 1930s, television in the 1960s, satellite dishes and the Internet in the 1990s, and camera–equipped mobile phones in the last few years have triggered contentious, sometimes violent, debates about the good Islamic society, male–female interactions, and relations with the West. These debates have mostly been resolved through compromises that led to slow but fundamental changes in modalities of governance, placating the country's most vocal activists while preserving the rule of the Saudi royal family. However, as will be discussed shortly, social stability in Saudi Arabia can be characterized as a moving equilibrium that can be shaken when a new element, such as reality television, enters the media landscape. The moving equilibrium is made even more vulnerable by the fact that the Saudi media space is now part of a large, pan–Arab media space, which increases the likelihood of the occurrence of events that challenge Saudi social stability.

The challenge of hypermedia to Saudi social organization

The Arab media landscape has experienced fundamental changes in the past decade, including a triple transformation from nationally based, state–owned terrestrial television services, to transnational, privately owned, satellite channels [4]. Among those changes is the influx of format–based productions that adapt successful European and American programs to fit local sensibilities. In this context, reality television has become the most commercially successful media genre in the Arab world. For the most part made in Lebanon, Arab reality television shows are as contentious as they are popular in Saudi Arabia. Reality television programs are hybrid texts whose mixture of "Western" and "Arab" elements blurs cultural boundaries [5]. This, in addition to claims to being "real" and reliance on active viewer participation through voting, fuels controversy in tandem with popularity. Most importantly, reality television mobilizes various media such as satellite television, the Internet, mobile telephony and text messaging. As a result, reality television activates new configurations between multiple media: Short Messaging System (SMS) texts and Multimedia Messaging System (MMS) images that appear on television tickers, pictures taken by

mobile phones and posted on Web sites, columns in the digital pan–Arab press and reader replies to these columns, and others.

The hypermedia space resulting from these multiple configurations between various media is now an alternative space for Arab social relations, where Saudis can communicate using the multiple media technologies that their high incomes allows them to purchase. Because the governance of hypermedia space is radically different from the governance of social space in Saudi Arabia, it is likely that contention ensues over control of the newly opened communication processes. In this context, hypermedia space and the notion of interactivity can be considered as digital corollaries of Islamic social space and male–female interaction, or *ikhtilat*. The ensuing analysis demonstrates that the hypermedia space is contentious because it articulates debates, triggered by reality television, that undermine the equilibrium of the Saudi social system. The debate then focuses on what changes are needed in governance modalities in order to extend governance to Saudi hypermedia space. In all this, as a central node in the configurations between various media, television is the site of encounter between social space and hypermedia space. For that reason, we will see that public contention will revolve mostly around television, pitting various groups against each other in the definition of social boundaries. In addition to Saudi authorities, Islamist activists and business interests have the most to win or lose from changes in the mode of governance, so the issue must be understood in terms of contention and compromise between these three parties, with the Saudi royal family being at once part of the other two constituencies, and acting as a mediator between them. But why does the move of Saudi social relations to hypermedia space create such controversy?

But why does the move of Saudi social relations to hypermedia space create such controversy?

Space is fundamental to Saudi social organization and to the regulation of male–female relations, with the ultimate objective of preventing *ikhtilat*, or gender mixing. According to Wahhabi interpretations of Islam, which are highly influential in Saudi Arabia, the boundaries between private and public space are so important that they are considered sacred. *Hudud*, Arabic for boundaries, is in this view divinely decreed in the *Qur'an*. However, as any other text, the *Qur'an* is subject to various interpretations dependent on historical and cultural context and on the hermeneutic vagaries of individual scholars. The hypermedia environment affects uses and definitions of *hudud* in two ways to be discussed next, the first having to do with what some scholars have called "distributional changes" and the second with "changes in social epistemology." [6]

1. First, the emergence in the 1990s of cyber–imams and tele–imams multiplies the sources of jurisprudence and expanded the range and scope of Qur'anic hermeneutics. Islamic Web sites, most of them in both Arabic and English, have multiplied sources of religious authority and cater to Muslims worldwide. These developments trigger "changes in the relative power of social forces as a consequence of the change in the mode of communication ... social forces survive differentially ... according to their fitness with the new communications environment." [7] Besides blurring the boundaries between Arab Muslims and other Asian and African Muslims, these Web sites have blurred the boundaries between homebound Muslims and diasporic Muslims living in North and South America, Europe, and Australia. Perhaps more importantly, the hypermedia environment has blurred the boundaries between scholars and laypeople, between producers of Islamic jurisprudence and its consumers. For instance, a Saudi women who is uncertain how to respond to some of her husband's sexual requests, and who is not satisfied with the ruling, or *fatwa*, of a local cleric, can consult the famous sheikh Yusuf al–Qaradawi, the Egyptian–born, Qatar–based, Al–Jazeera star and supervisor of Islam Online, one of the largest and most active Islamic Web sites. She can then use al–Qaradawi's *fatwa* to confront her local cleric and her husband, and not submit to unwanted sexual requests.

   In addition to a lay woman using a *fatwa* from a globally renowned cleric against repressive local interpretation, therefore blurring the boundaries between producer and consumer of information, this example illustrates the dissolution of the boundary between the private and public realms. The woman's request for a ruling on an intimate issue moves to the public domain as it is posted on Islam Online, with the woman's first name or without, and can then be used by others who find themselves in a similar situation, on a worldwide scope since it will be hyperlinked to many other Web sites. Perhaps these intimate issues become even more public if they are discussed on al–Qaradawi's *Al–Shari'a Wal Hayat* (Islamic Law and Life), al–Jazeera's flagship religious affairs program. There callers e–mail, text message, fax or call the sheikh seeking and getting advice in more immediate and interactive way than on the Web site. The limitation is that a command of Arabic is necessary to participate in the program, while English is enough for using the Web site. In this example, the blurring of boundaries in the hypermedia environment remains within the acceptable *hudud* because it uses technical language, because of the visual presentation and attire of guest and host, and most importantly because the program is under the supervision of al–

Qaradawi, a powerful and reputable religious scholar [8].

2. Reality television clashes with the established mode of governance in a second, more controversial way. The fluidity of boundaries (between the foreign and the domestic, the pure and the adulterated) heralded by reality television is highly contentious because it calls into question the basis upon which sacred boundaries, the *hudud*, are established. In this case, as we shall see shortly, hypermedia implodes social boundaries from within, rather than challenging them from without, affecting changes to social epistemology, whereby "an increasing portion of those acculturated into a new communications environment will come to see a particular symbolic form or social construct as more 'natural' and 'reasonable' — more consistent with their overall communications experience — and it is through this intergenerational 'selection' process that it will flourish over time." [9]

Most important in this regard is the combination of *interactivity*, *mobility* and *visibility*, whose media corollaries can be understood to be respectively (and approximately) the Internet, text and multimedia messaging, mobile telephony, and television. Interactivity clashes with the Wahhabi Islamic ban on *ikhtilat*, or gender mixing, while mobility undermines social control based on the surveillance of space, and television brings these *haram*, or forbidden, actions into the public realm, to a large audience whose members in turn re-engage the process using the same technologies. This cycle of remediation and intertextuality is a fundamental dynamic of the Saudi Arab hypermedia space. To understand this dynamic, and how reality television activated this dynamic, a historical approach is needed to map the historical development of the key media and information technologies that have entered Saudi social space, and how the various constituencies in the Kingdom have responded to these technologies and to competing claims surrounding these technologies. This history begins with television, through the Internet, and ends with smaller, surreptitious technologies such as camera-equipped mobile phones. Following the discussion of the historical milestones of media developments in Saudi Arabia is an elaboration of a theory of hypermedia in which small media activate inter-media configurations that connect media old and new, analog and digital, big and small; creating a hypermedia space that is less controllable than social space in Saudi Arabia and therefore potentially subversive of the prevalent mode of governance. What was the historical context of the introduction of various media technologies to Saudi Arabia?

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Saudi Arabia and television: Between repulsion and attraction

The introduction of television to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia triggered hostile reactions leading to the assassination of King Faysal in 1975 [10]. But since the 1960s, the royal family believed television was essential to its own survival and to the Kingdom's national unity and modernization drive. Despite regular attacks for corrupting morals and enabling a Western cultural invasion, television has thrived in Saudi Arabia and today Saudi capital controls most of the pan-Arab satellite television industry.

Reactions to the introduction of television to Saudi Arabia reflect the diverse spectrum and balance of power within Saudi power circles. The royal family of Saud, whose religious legitimacy rests on the backing of the Shaikh family of clerics, has pushed an aggressive program of modernization since the 1950s, especially at the economic level, establishing Saudi Arabia as a capitalist economy, albeit with strong oligarchic tendencies. The contradictions between a capitalistic economy dependent on trade with foreigners and a conservative society hostile to foreign influences explain the various political and religious maneuvers that surround the initial introduction of and subsequent debate about new information and media technologies. Innovations have always been resisted by religious radicals, for whom the word innovation, or *bidaa*, has a negative connotation since it refers to innovations on God's word, which is perfect and therefore not subject to any changes. Even the bicycle was resisted, called the Horse of Satan, and in the 1960s a special government permit was needed to ride a bicycle. The introduction of mass media was fiercely resisted, especially photography, film and television whose visual nature is problematic because of the Qur'anic injunction against reproducing the human figure.

Saudi rulers, however, were cognizant of the importance of media technology for their own longevity in power and for the Kingdom's modernizing drive in general. So in the early 1960s, King Ibn Saud

> "... summoned his detractors and convened the ulema ... and put forth questions: Painting and sculpture are idolatry, but is light good or bad? The judges pondered and replied that light is good; Allah put the sun in the heavens to light man's path. Then asked the King, is a shadow good or bad? There was nothing in the Qur'an about this, but the judges deduced and ruled that shadows are good, because they are inherent in light, and even a holy man casts a shadow. Very well then, said the King, photography is good because it is nothing but a combination of light and shade, depicting Allah's creatures but leaving them unchanged. The battle was won in the King's characteristic way, by persuasion and not by force." [11]

This incident reveals the balancing act that Saudi rulers have had to strike between the drive to modernize and the desire to soothe deeply entrenched religious sensitivities. Nonetheless, until today, nearly half a century later, the Saudi religious establishment has applied unrelenting pressure to censor media content it deems offensive. Media censorship guidelines for media products imported into Saudi Arabia since the late 1960s prohibit the following:

1. Scenes which arouse sexual excitement
2. Women who appear indecently dressed, in dance scenes, or in scenes which show overt acts of love
3. Women who appear in athletic games or sports
4. Alcoholic drinks or anything connected with drinking
5. Derogatory references to any of the "Heavenly Religions"
6. Treatment of other countries with praise, satire, or contempt
7. References to Zionism
8. Material meant to expose monarchy
9. All immoral scenes
10. References to betting or gambling
11. Excessive violence [12]

In the days of terrestrial television, these guidelines were easy to enforce by a Saudi government in control of television production, transmission, and to a lesser extent, reception. The 1991 Gulf War triggered the so-called Arab satellite revolution, in which Saudi Arabia is an active participant as financier, logistical player, and audience [13]. We will briefly see that Saudi Arabian authorities have also had good success in censoring the Internet, a medium appropriated by Islamists. However, as this paper ultimately demonstrates, the advent of ever smaller, more portable, and more inter-connected information and media technologies displaced social relations from the rigidly controlled public space to the less controllable hypermedia space. Before we establish the role of portable media in the formation of hypermedia space, it is important to understand how the Internet has been received, used and discussed in Saudi Arabia.

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Saudi Arabia and the Internet

In contrast to the contention and violence that greeted television's entry into Saudi Arabia, the introduction of the Internet was treated with initial anxiety quickly followed by the establishment of elaborate monitoring and control mechanism by Saudi authorities, and an enthusiastic embrace of the network as an unprecedented tool to "spread good and combat evil" by Islamic activists [14]. Similarly, mobile telephony was welcomed in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries where locals, who are already enthusiastic and well-to-do consumers of electronic gadgets, subscribed in record numbers. What distinguishes Saudi Arabia from other countries in the region, however, is the monumental resources the Kingdom expends to monitor and control Internet usage.

Saudi Arabia is one of the most successful states in monitoring the content and restricting access to the Internet, with the government investing heavily in infrastructure and personnel to control its citizens' access to the Internet. The King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), established initially in 1977 as the Saudi Arabian National Center for Science and Technology, is the locus of interaction between Saudi state and society and the global network. The Internet was introduced in 1999, and in April 2003, there were 21 functioning Internet service providers and around 1.6 million users [15].

A special Internet Services Unit at the KACST is in charge of blocking Web sites, headed by director-general Iyas al-Hajiri. A 12 February 2001 resolution of the Saudi Council of Ministers bans access to and

publication of several kinds of information on the Internet, including content critical of the Saudi state, advocating violence, or slanderous [16]. The resolution has detailed provisions about commercial and technical logistics regulating relations between content providers and consumers [17]. The ISU receives request from a "security committee" of 10 to 12 individuals from a variety of ministries, headed by an official from the Ministry of the Interior, whose job is to monitor Internet content and request blocking Web sites [18]. In addition, a Web-based form is available on the KACST Web site for users to report sites they think should be blocked [19]. According to al-Hajiri, 95 percent of blocked sites are pornographic, and the remaining five percent have social and political content [20]. An average estimate, according to *Saudi Gazette*, is that 25,000 new sites are blocked every month [21]. However, unfiltered Internet access is available through proxy servers in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates [22] and through satellite dish providers within Saudi Arabia [23]. In addition, most computer centers and Internet cafes have hackers who offer their services to help access blocked sites or private e-mail accounts for a fee ranging from US $30 to US$70 a time [24]. Also, the Saudi opposition in exile, mostly based in London, such as the Movement for Islamic Reform in Saudi Arabia (MIRA) actively uses the Internet in its campaign against the Saudi royal family, frequently changing domain names to overcome censorship [25].

Nowadays, the Internet is a topic of general interest in Saudi Arabia. Leading national dailies such as *al-Riyadh* [26], and pan-Arab dailies owned by Saudis and oriented towards Saudi Arabia such as *Asharq-al-Awsat* [27], have daily pages devoted to information technology, usually including information about software updates, new hardware, and the occasional commentary. Uses of information are also commented upon in the press, such as during Saudi Arabia's first ever local elections, which ended on 24 April 2005, in which candidates used Web sites and (more extensively) mobile phone text messaging in their campaign [28]. The pros and cons of the Internet are also frequently debated on Saudi television. On 1 September 2004, guests of a television talk show on Saudi Channel 1, *Ma'a al-Ahdath* (*Following Events*), focused on positive aspects of the Internet. The two guests, a sociology professor at the Islamic University of Imam Muhammad Bin Saud, Dr. Abd-al-Aziz al-Gharib, and a government IT consultant, Dr. Fahd al-Huwaymani, focused respectively on the social and technical benefits of the Internet, framed by the host, Badr al-Fuhayd, as "a phenomenon for social change." [29] After debating extremist Islamist Web sites, censorship, and individual engagement with the Internet, al-Huwaymani argued that "the Internet offered cure to problems, such as religious tolerance and extremism and cultural isolation" and reinforced "values of tolerance and openness" and cited a survey claiming that 77 percent of Internet users in Saudi Arabia thought the medium was very useful [30]. Both guests disapproved of Internet censorship and underplayed the dangers of Internet pornography and cybercrime [31].

One week earlier, on 24 August 2005, the same program, with a different host, had two guests discussing how religious extremism and calls to violence were spread via the Internet. The two guests, law professor Dr. Abd-al-Rahman Bin Abdallah al-Sanad and "Internet expert" Dr. Fayiz al-Shihri. While the first expert emphasized the benefits of the Internet, the second referred to a study showing that "64 per cent of Web sites visited by a sample of Saudis were specialized in violence and terrorism, 21 per cent were theological Web sites especially opinions on Jihad, and nine per cent were classified as chat rooms for political discussions" [32] and called on Saudi religious officials to combat extremist ideas on the Internet.

While the debate on the Internet is significantly less controversial than the rancorous contention over television a few decades earlier, the introduction of camera equipped mobile phones, linking television and the Internet in the context of reality television, underscores how the new hypermedia environment clashes with the older mode of governance in Saudi Arabia. In effect, new inter-media configurations create "media hybrids," defined as "the affiliations of technical artifacts, rhetorical justification and social relationships" [33], which call for new modes of governance. The next section analyzes how the convergence of big and small media sets bases for a new media environment, leading to a theoretical discussion of the changing boundaries of agency in the context of the emerging hypermedia space constructed by new inter-media configurations triggered by Arabic-language reality television.

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Convergence, hypermedia and social space in Saudi Arabia

Unlike television, and more like the Internet, the introduction of mobile telephony was initially uncontroversial in Saudi Arabia, rapidly becoming pervasive in a wealthy and vast country with a population concentrated in few cities. A recent (2003) estimate put the number of land telephone lines in Saudi Arabia at 3,502,600 and mobile lines at 7,238,200, while there are 1.5 million Internet users [34]. According to a recent study by Riyadh-based Economic Studies House, the growth of mobile telephony in Saudi Arabia will be from the current 30 percent of the population to 60 percent in 2014, with the number of mobile phone users then estimated at 20 million [35]. Mobile telephones have for the first decade or so of their spread in

Saudi Arabia, been consider a culturally and socially neutral technology that is also essential for conducting business. This relaxed attitude towards mobile phones changed with the introduction of new technological developments such as text messaging, digital cameras, and the Bluetooth device.

Bluetooth was the subject of engaged commentary in the (Saudi) Arab press [36]. It in effect digitized a flirting ritual well established in Saudi Arabia which consists of surreptitiously throwing a piece of paper with your phone number on it in front of a member of the opposite gender, while crossing their path in a mall, a park or another public space, or showing your phone number through your car window at a traffic stop. As a Saudi teenager said during an interview with a newspaper, "Using Bluetooth is much better than trying to throw the number to the girls through car windows, or in the shopping center ... through Bluetooth I guarantee that the other party chose to accept my number or the file I sent. In other words, I don't impose myself on anyone." According to the same article some electronic names include "Spoiled Girl of Jeddah," "Miss Chocolate," and "Women's Mechanic" and "There were others you will not see in this newspaper." [37] Bluetooth was controversial enough to be considered an issue worth monitoring by the Commission for the Prevention of Vice Promotion of Virtue (Hay'at al–Amr Bil Maarouf wal Nahi aan al Mounkar).

The advent of mobile phones equipped with digital cameras caused a bigger stir, because of conservative Islamic views on images of the human figure. In late 2004, Saudi authorities enacted a ban on camera–equipped mobile phones, only to revoke it after it recognizing that the technology had already spread through the Kingdom and large quantities of camera mobiles could easily be smuggled into the country in a thriving black market. The result was that, as a headline in the English–language daily *Arab News* put it, "Camera Phones [are] Legal but Individual Restrictions Apply." [38] The powerful Commission for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue [39] stated that it was against the misuse of camera phones, and not opposed to the technology itself. Nonetheless, several schools and universities in the Kingdom, in addition to health clubs for women, maintained a ban on camera phones on their premises [40]. Finally, on 16 April 2005, a new Saudi law was submitted to the 150–member Majlis al–Shoura, calling for stiff sanctions for mobile phone "pornography," including 1,000 lashes, 12 years in jail, and a fine of 100,000 Saudi riyals, or around US$26,670. This was in response to technical developments such as 3G mobile phones and Bluetooth [41].

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The controversy surrounding camera–equipped mobile phones can only be understood when we analyze it in connection to other media, especially television and the Internet. Connections between these media lead to various and often unpredictable information permutations, ultimately creating a hypermedia space less amenable to control than social space. The following section of this article illustrates how reality television and the interlocking economic, policy and religious issues it raises, activates these information permutations, bringing the issue of media convergence to the everyday, mundane level. One reality television show, *Star Academy*, and reactions (popular, political, religious, etc) to it within Saudi Arabia, provides a unique opportunity to understand how communication processes in hypermedia space put pressure on prevailing modalities of governance.

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Star Academy as a hypermedia event

The myriad tensions and contradictions inherent in a conservative society's encounter with the emergence of a new mode of governance whose central feature is a seamless hypermedia space moved to the forefront of public discourse in Saudi Arabia because of the unprecedented popularity in the kingdom of the Lebanese reality television show, *Star Academy*. The program, launched by the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation in December 2003, was a watershed media event throughout the Arab world, breaking ratings records, captivating wide sections of the population, infuriating conservatives and becoming the topic of everyday

talk from Morocco to Iraq.

Star Academy, the Arabic version of an original Dutch format made famous in 2002 by the French broadcaster TF1, is the most popular television program — and the most controversial — in the history of Arab television. For 18 weeks between December 2003 and April 2004, Arabs young and old were captivated by the screen interactions of 16 male and female contestants vying for pan–Arab stardom on the screen of the satellite channel of the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) satellite channel. Contestants, or, as they were official called, "the students," hailed from Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. Throughout every week of the show, the students took lessons in oral interpretation, dancing, singing, music, fashion, hair–styling, and make–up. Every week, the teachers designated two "nominees," [the English word was used], and after a live Friday night show performed by the students, the audience was asked to vote for the nominee who they wanted to remain on the show. The other nominee was in effect voted out of the *Academy*.

LBC rolled out an elaborate logistical operation for *Star Academy*, whether in casting, production, or programming. The casting campaign itself created a stir in the Arab world, and 16 finalists were selected from more than 3,000 applicants. The programming structure of the show gave it extreme prominence on Bloc's satellite and terrestrial grids. Every evening of the week except Saturday, the prime–time hour of 7 to 8 PM recapitulated the events of that day and showed snapshot of the contestants rehearsing, cooking, arguing, etc. Also, LBCI devoted a satellite channel it normally leases for its music channel called Nag ham, to *Star Academy*. More than 50 cameras provided a live feed from the *Academy* where the contestants were confined, every minute of every hour of everyday for the 18 weeks of the show. More than 250 people, including cameramen, technicians, directors, and dancers, worked on the show. This 24/7 coverage, free–to–air, sustained by massive human and technical resources, brought a continuous flow of images into most Arab households with a television set [42].

Star Academy was an instant hit. Arabs young and old, men and women, rich and poor, were enthralled. During the 7 to 8 access shows, the streets of Beirut, Riyadh and Rabat emptied out and restaurant owners complained that *Star Academy* was killing their business during the dinner hours. The fever reached its highest pitch on Friday night during the "prime" when "the students" performed for the public, including the two nominees, one of whom will be voted out. Arab youth created fan sites on the Internet, including discussion boards. The highly popular satellite television music channels such as Rotana, Mazzika, and others featured a flow of love and hate messages sent via SMS to *Star Academy* contestants and displayed on moving tickers at the bottom of their screen. Women's daytime talk–shows and men's public affairs programs discussed the phenomenon. Television professionals rushed to the drawing board to imitate the program's tremendous success. According to market research companies, *Star Academy* grabbed 80 percent of the 15–to–25 audience in Lebanon, and after a few weeks captured record numbers of the pan–Arab audience from Morocco to Saudi Arabia [43].

The controversy triggered by *Star Academy* was proportional to the program's popularity, especially in Saudi Arabia, where clerics and politicians condemned it and a Saudi columnist in the establishment daily *al–Riyadh* called *Star Academy* "a whorehouse," using epithets rarely printed in the Saudi press, while religious activists distributed an audio cassette carrying fiery sermons titled "The Academy of the Devil." [44] Clerics were inundated with requests for rulings on whether it was *haram* or *hall* to watch and participate in the show. In what amounted to a rare dissenting youth voice in a cyberspace enamored with the show, an Islamist youth group set up a now defunct Web site called No2StarAcademy.net. More importantly, the highly influential "Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwa's" in Saudi Arabia issued a lengthy *fatwa*, replete with citations from the *Qur'an* and Habit, prohibiting watching, discussing, voting in or participating in *Star Academy*. These are some excerpts from the *fatwa* (emphasis added by author):

> "The Standing Committee for Academic Research and Issuing Fatwa's has studied the questions from a number of proud Muslims concerning the program broadcast by some Arabic satellite channels which is called "Star Academy" and other similar shows. After studying the matter, the Committee thinks that these shows should be banned and it is *harem to watch them, finance them, take part in them, call them to vote or to express admiration of them*, because of what these shows include of allowing forbidden things concerning which there is consensus that they are forbidden, and doing so brazenly ... What brazenness in committing harem and immoral actions can be worse than these shows which include a number of serious evils? These include:
>
> 1. — Free mixing of the sexes. ...
>
> So what about these programs, the main idea of which is mixing between the sexes and removing all barriers between them, as well as the wanton display and unveiling on the part of the

women, and displaying their charms which leads to much evil?
2. — Blatant promotion of immorality and the means that lead to it. [this is related to illicit sexual intercourse]
3. — The call to remove hay′ (modesty, shyness) and ghee rah (protective jealousy, pride) from the hearts of the Muslims by making them get used to seeing these shameful scenes that provoke desires and distancing them from good morals and virtue.

...

It is not sufficient for you to abstain from watching these shows; you should also advise and remind those whom you know watch them or take part in them in any way, because that comes under the heading of cooperating in righteousness and piety, and forbidding one another to engage in sin and transgression.

The Committee also calls upon the businessmen who finance these shows to fear Allah with regard to the blessing of wealth that Allah has bestowed upon them, and not use it for things that will adversely affect the youth of this amah, destroy the symbols of Islam and serve the enemies of Islam, for this is a kind of ingratitude for blessings and is a cause of their loss.

It is obvious that these kinds of shows are among the causes of disasters that strike Islam and the Muslims.″

The Standing Committee′s ruling, citing the *Qur′an* and *Habit* (the speeches of the Prophet Muhammad), covers several of the issues included in the Saudi censorship guidelines. The focus is clearly on women and their interactions with men. Somewhat less usual is their warning to businessmen who finance reality television, which constitutes an acknowledgement of the economic forces behind this media phenomenon. These warnings can be better understood once put in the context of Saudi–Lebanese media relations.

The Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation and Saudi Arabia are entangled in a complex relationship with contradictory economic and cultural components. First and foremost, LBC′s satellite operation makes more financial profit on the basis of its ability to reach the Saudi audience than from any other factor. LBC′s commoditization of women is central to its leadership of the market and its ability to create entertainment program mixing high production values, light heartedness, boldness and titillation. LBC′s Saudi entanglements include LBC–Sat, a company created in 1996 as a joint venture with AMC, headed by the Saudi financier Saleh Kamel, who owned 49 percent of LBC–Sat (the satellite channel, separate from LBCI, the Lebanese terrestrial channel), registered in the Cayman Islands to circumscribe Lebanese ownership laws. In 2003, that other Saudi investor, Prince al–Waleed Bin Tall, paid US$98 million to acquire Saleh Kamel′s shares, since LBC–Sat′s market value was estimated at US$200 million [45]. As a pan–Arab leader in entertainment television, LBC has been a commercial success story whose ability to attract investors is given a powerful boost by mega–successes such as *Star Academy*.

By collapsing technical boundaries between television, telephony and computing, convergence created a hypermedia environment that exacerbated controversy surrounding these "new" media technologies ...

By all definitions, *Star Academy* qualifies as a media event, not necessarily in the neo–Durkheimian analysis of Dayan and Katz [46] which endows media events with a unifying force, but more along the lines of John Fiske′s definition of media events as moments of extreme discursive visibility [47]. However, in contrast to other media events such as the wedding of Charles and Diana, a U.S. State of the Nation presidential address, or more recently the funeral of John Pope II, *Star Academy′s* audience was actively involved in the making of the event, setting up Web sites, voting with text messaging, participating in electronic discussion groups, attending the shootings of some sections of the show, etc [48]. This active participation leads me to propose that we think of *Star Academy* and similar events as *hypermedia events*. By collapsing technical boundaries between television, telephony and computing, convergence created a hypermedia environment that exacerbated controversy surrounding these "new" media technologies, reminiscent of the initially hostile debates around television in Saudi Arabia.

This explains why in early 2005, the Saudi Telecommunication Company announced it was not allowing text messaging to vote for contestants in the Lebanese reality television show *Star Academy* because such shows were incompatible with Islamic moral values. The decision, which was a clear nod to the Islamic activist constituency in the country, was ridiculed by columnists in both the Arabic and English language Arab press as smacking of demagogy and technically meaningless since STC was to allow voting via land telephone lines and the Internet [49]. Nonetheless, this measure illustrate how business interests enter the fray of the debate on the social implication of media in order to "score points," using the socio-political controversy surrounding *Star Academy* as a public relations opportunity.

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Governance and the shifting boundaries of agency

The changing nature of governance in Saudi Arabia may be best understood in terms of shifting social and political boundaries. In a complex polity such as Saudi Arabia, a boundary shift somewhere in the system means that boundaries throughout the system will require readjustment. In the past, new media technologies challenged Saudi social boundaries from without, which often lead to changes within the system. One of the reasons that the royal family decided to allow television in the Kingdom in the early 1960s was to counter the Arab nationalist, anti-royalist attacks of the Voice of the Arabs, Gamal Abdel Nasser's Cairo-based radio station and the Arab world's first transnational electronic mass medium. In that case, the political imperative of countering Nasser's attacks, coupled to the economic imperative of modernization, outweighed pressure from religious leaders opposed to television. In 1991, the success of CNN among Arab audiences during the Gulf War led to the establishment of the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) in London [50]. Similarly, Al-Jazeera's criticism of the Saudi royal family throughout the 1990s lead members of the latter to establish Al-Arabiya in Dubai in 2002. Events such as the Gulf war and the 2003 invasion of Iraq created major realignments in Saudi social and political boundaries.

Saudi authorities have proven adept at controlling or at least managing "big" media such as newspapers and television, either by censorship or, much more effectively, by buying out most of the Arabic-language media industry [51]. The situation is different with less visible media like the Internet and mobile telephony. These deterritorialized and mobile technologies undermine social and political boundaries from within, and therefore they are much more difficult to control. Hence the unruliness of the hypermedia space created by the information configurations between television, Internet, newspapers, and mobile telephones. The activation of these configurations is one of the reasons behind the controversy triggered by reality television in Saudi Arabia.

The other reason *Star Academy* is controversial in the Kingdom is its staging of active and public male-female interactions in the context of the competition for the title. Minimally covered women's bodies are not the source of the controversy, neither are the uses of profanity or the consumption of alcohol. Contestants in *Star Academy* are rather modestly attired and well-behaved. The controversy stems from the fact that in *Star Academy*, not only do females interact with males while engaging in *haram* (forbidden) behavior such as dancing and singing, but women often win over men when male contestants are voted out by the audience after facing off a female nominee. In contrast to the past, when foreign popular culture elicited criticism in Saudi Arabia and other Arab and Islamic countries for showing women as sexual objects, conservative attacks against *Star Academy* oppose the show's depiction of women as social agents.

... two-third of Saudi Internet users are estimated to be women. This suggests that women are active participants in hypermedia space because they are not allowed participation in social space.

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The main difference between the Saudi social space and hypermedia space is that the latter enables women's agency, which the former is designed to curtail. That women have a wider margin of maneuver and are more active social agents in hypermedia space can be observed at a basic level in the fact that two-third of Saudi Internet users are estimated to be women [52]. This suggests that women are active participants in hypermedia space because they are not allowed participation in social space [53]. Agency,

broadly defined as the ability to do otherwise [54] permeates hypermedia space, while in Saudi social space it is confined to a rigid hierarchy at the head of which sit the royal family and senior religious figures. Agency resides partly in hypermedia space, because as Bolter and Grusin argue, "[M]edia do have agency, but that agency ... is constrained and hybrid ... the agency of cultural change is located on the interaction of formal, material, and economic logics that slip into and out of the grasp of individuals and social groups." [55] To argue that "media have agency" without falling prey to media determinism, we have to think of hypermedia as a space whose agency potential is realized when individuals and communities "connect" and activate information configurations.

When media hybrids articulate the technical, social and rhetorical, they become contentious because they in effect suggest, if not fully elaborate, an alternative social reality, one that remains latent until a trigger like reality television brings it to the forefront of public discourse. An alternative social reality is articulated when the core principles of the prevalent social order are undermined. The prohibition on *ikhtilat* is the center of the Saudi social system. By activating hypermedia space, reality television made visible the displacement of that center and the contention arising from that de−centering. The popularity and controversy of *Star Academy* are explained by its articulation of a "reality" that is not only different, but clashes with the Saudi social order. As the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo wrote about the role of media in defining a reality without a social center:

> "If we, in late modernity, have an idea of reality, it cannot be understood as the objectives given lying beneath, or beyond, the images we receive of it from our media. How and where could we arrive at such a reality 'in itself'? For us, reality is rather the result of the intersection ... of a multiplicity of images, interpretations and reconstructions circulated by the media in competition with one another and without any 'central' coordination." [56]

The problem is that the prevalent (shall I say residual?) mode of governance in Saudi Arabia is based on precisely the kind of "central coordination" that Vattimo writes about. Political and religious centralization of power finds its media equivalent in the terrestrial broadcasting facilities or more aptly in the King Abdulaziz City of Science and Technology, centralized facilities with centralized control. That mode of governance is experiencing intense strain with the advent of small, interactive and portable information and media technologies that decentralize power and deterritorialized agency. The new hypermedia space cannot be comprehended, let alone governed, from a central location. As the popularity of *Star Academy* and the controversy it triggered indicate, the logic of hypermedia space (capture rather than surveillance, blogging rather than hacking) requires a new mode of governance whose *modus operandi* is to manage and channel rather than block and control information.

This article provided an international case study of how changes in the media environment affect and are affected by changing parameters of governance. Using the example of a highly popular and controversial Lebanese reality television program and its reception in Saudi Arabia, the chapter illustrates how interactions among different media and communication processes shift when new media enter the communication environment. The reception of *Star Academy* by Saudi society provides a heuristic example of an environment in which fundamental aspects of the nature of governance have been affected by the emergence of what I called hypermedia space. In heavily policed social environments like Saudi Arabia's, hypermedia space becomes an alternative space for social communication, whose dynamics undermine established modalities of governance and compel policy makers to search for new parameters of governance.

About the author

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Notes

1. Ronald J. Deibert, 1997. *Parchment, printing, and hypermedia: Communication in world order transformation*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 114−115.

2. Hypermedia is a notion I borrow from the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard pace the Canadian international relations scholar Ronald Deibert in his 1997 book *Parchment, printing, and hypermedia: Communication in world order transformation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). In his work on convergence, Henry Jenkins III (2004) refers to the new communication landscape as "a kind of kludge — a jerry-rigged relationship between different media technologies — rather than a fully integrated system" (p. 34).

3. For a historical-political analysis, albeit dated, see Ghassane Salameh, 1980. "Political power and the Saudi state," *Middle East Research & Information Project (MERIP) Reports*, number 91 [*Saudi Arabia on the brink*]. Washington, D.C.: MERIP.

4. By "Arab media space" I mean the space for public discourse creates by various transnational media technologies, with special emphasis on pan-Arab satellite television and pan-Arab daily newspapers. The most important feature of this Arab media space is that it largely transcends national boundaries and extends from Morocco in the West to Iraq in the East, in addition to Arabic-speaking migrant communities in North and South America, Western and Eastern Europe, Africa and Australia.

5. For a detailed theoretical discussion of hybrid media texts (including format adaptation) and their cultural, political and economic implications, see Marwan M. Kraidy, 2005. *Hybridity, or the cultural logic of globalization*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).

6. These are the terms used by Ronald Deibert in *Parchment, printing, and hypermedia: Communication in world order transformation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

7. Deibert, 1997, p. 66.

8. For more on al-Qaradawi, see Sandra Houot, 2003/2004. "Culture religieuse et média électronique: Le cas du cheikh Muhammad al-Buti," In: "L'internet arabe," special issue of *Maghreb-Mashrek*, volume 178, pp. 75-88.

9. Deibert, 1997, p. 35.

10. During test broadcasts of Saudi television in September 1965, Khalid Ibn Musad, a conservative prince, led a demonstration to destroy television transmitters, which was ultimately dispersed. Shortly thereafter, Ibn Musad was shot dead by an official of the Ministry of the Interior. Ten years later, his brother Faysal Ibn Musad assassinated King Faysal to avenge the death of his brother. For details see Douglas A. Boyd, 1999. *Broadcasting in the Arab world: A survey of the electronic media in the Middle East*. Third edition. (Ames: Iowa State University Press).

11. W. Eddy, 1963. "King Ibn Sa'ud: Our faith and your iron," *Middle East Journal*, volume 17, number 3, p. 258.

12. A.S. Shobaili, 1971. "A historical and analytical study of broadcasting and press in Saudi Arabia," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, pp. 272-273, quoted in Douglas A. Boyd, 1999, p. 164.

13. There is an official ban on satellite dishes which is not enforced, and few people even remember it is on the books.

14. It is now widely known that Islamist groups and Islamic clerics have elaborate and well-maintained Web sites, ranging from the Sunni sheikh al-Qaradawi to the Shia Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq, to terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. For a sustained analysis of Saudi Islamic dissident groups and their use of the Internet, in addition to fax machines, see Mamoun Fandy, 1999. *Saudi Arabia and the politics of dissent*. New York: St. Martin's Press, or in more condensed form by the same author, "CyberResistance: Saudi opposition between globalization and localization," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, volume 41, number 1, pp. 124-147.

15. "Analysis: Saudi rulers ease their grip on the media," BBC Monitoring Media Services, 28 May 2004. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

16. "Saudi Internet Rules," http://www.al-bab.com/media/docs/saudi.htm.

17. *Ibid.*

18. "Local Content Filtering Policy," Internet Services Unit, King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology, http://www.isu.net.sa/saudi-internet/contentnet-filtring-policy.htm, and "Saudi Arabia: 'Extremist' web sites blocked at request of security agencies," BBC Monitoring International Reports, 22 July 2004. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

19. "Local Content Filtering Procedure," Internet Services Unit, King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology, http://www.isu.net.sa/saudi-internet/contentnet-filtring/filtring-mechanism.htm.

20. "Saudi Arabia: 'Extremist' web sites blocked at request of security agencies," BBC Monitoring International Reports, 22 July 2004. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

21. *Ibid.*

22. "Country profile: Saudi Arabia," http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/middle_east/country_profiles/ 791936.stm. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

23. "Saudi Arabia: 'Extremist' web sites blocked at request of security agencies," BBC Monitoring International Reports, 22 July 2004. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

24. "Saudis pay to surf censored sites," BBC News, 3 November 2001, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1636789.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Al–Riyadh* is the leading national Saudi daily newspaper with a circulation of 140,000 in the Kingdom.

27. *Asharq–al–Awsat*, a daily Arabic language newspaper headquartered in London with an estimated circulation of 250,000, is the flagship of Saudi Research and Marketing, a company owned by Saudi brothers Hisham and Mohammed Ali Hafez. The company is vertically integrated, and owns its own publishing, distribution and advertising structures.

28. Nemr, Suleiman & Saman, "Muhammad, moderate Islamists and technocrats win in western province elections," *Al–Hayat* (25 April 2005).

29. "Saudi TV highlights positive effects of the Internet," BBC Monitoring Middle East, 2 September 2004. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. "Saudi TV discusses Internet role in spreading culture of violence," BBC Monitoring Middle East, 26 August 2004, London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

33. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, 1999. *Remediation: Understanding new media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, p. 61.

34. "Saudi Arabia," *CIA Factbook* (2004).

35. "20 million mobile users by 2014," *Arab News*, at http://www.arabnews.com, 18 March 2005.

36. See for example "'Bluetooth' in Saudi Arabia prospers in lost time," *Al–Hayat* [in Arabic], 26 March 2005 and Ghada Aboud, "Teenagers sinking their teeth into new technology," *Arab News* (10 February 2005).

37. Ghada Aboud, "Teenagers sinking their teeth into new technology," *Arab News* (10 Fenruary 2005).

38. Maha Akeel, "Camera phones legal but individual restrictions apply," *Arab News* (10 January 2005).

39. Alternately called the Society for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, this is an official organism whose director was given ministerial status in 1976 and reports directly to the Saudi king. The foot soldiers of the commission are the *mutawa'a*, or religious police.

40. Maha Akeel, "Camera phones legal but individual restrictions apply," *Arab News* (10 January 2005).

41. "New Saudi law to jail, lash cellphone porn users," *Reuters*, Riyadh, (16 April 2005).

42. These facts were gleaned during several interviews conducted by the author with member of the *Star Academy* crew, including Roula Saad, LBC's Director of Promotion and Marketing, who also played the role of Director of the *Academy*, at LBC headquarters in Adma, Lebanon, in June and July 2004.

43. These audience figures were obtained by the author during personal interviews with professional market and audience researchers in Beirut, Lebanon and Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in the period May–July 2004.

44. Mounira Mohammad Al–Dakhil, "Destructive Academy is harmful to the family," *al–Riyadh* (27 February 2005).

45. See Osama Habib, "Alwaleed buys large stake in LBC SAT," *Daily Star* (3 December 2003).

46. See Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, 1992. *Media events: The live broadcasting of history*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

47. John Fiske, 1996. *Media matters: Race and gender in U.S. politics*. Revised edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

48. LBC rolled out an impressive logistical operation, including a four–story building with around 60 cameras feeding live, 24 hour a day for four months, on a 24–hour satellite channel devoted to the show, a daily "access" show during prime time, and a weekly "prime" show when one "nominee" is voted out by the audience.

49. See Badreiah Al–Bushr, "Telecommunications loses," *Asharq–al–Awsat* [in Arabic] (18 March 2005) and Abeer Mishkhas, "Tilting at the wrong windmills," *Arab News* (13 January 2005).

50. The Middle East Broadcasting center was initially launched as a news channel, but after several policy and programming changes, it is now one of the leading entertainment channels, with the news role taken by its counterpart Al–Arabiya.

51. On the latter, see Douglas Boyd, 2001. "Saudi Arabia's international media strategy: Influence through multinational ownership," In: Kai Hafez (editor). *Mass media, politics, and society in the Middle East*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, pp. 43–60.

52. "Country profile: Saudi Arabia," http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/middle_east/country_profiles/ 791936.stm. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

53. Interestingly, the 12 February 2001 Council of Ministers resolution about the Internet mentions economic, political, educational and health issues, but include no mention of sexual content or women.

54. See Anthony Giddens, 1984. *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

55. Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 78.

56. Gianni Vattimo, 1992. *The transparent society*. Translated by David Webb. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 7.

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